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Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans

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Williams Research Center of The Historic New Orleans Collection

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Sharing Resources in the World of Downsizing: A Dialog

Susan Kienzler and Gerald F. Patout Jr.

During this age of shrinking resources and escalating demands, downsizing can affect cultural agencies as well as businesses. In the process, seemingly disparate organizations sometimes form an alliance that creates the elusive quality called synergy, which the dictionary defines as a “mutually advantageous conjunction of distinct participants or elements.” The Ursuline Sisters of New Orleans Louisiana and The Historic New Orleans Collection, very different institutions that nonetheless share a commitment to documenting New Orleans and Louisiana history, established just such a conjunction when the Ursuline Sisters began refocusing their resources on their core mission in the 1990s.

The article that follows presents a dialog between representatives of those two organizations as each narrates the story of this surprising collaboration. Community Prioress Susan Kienzler, OSU (Ursuline Sisters of the Roman Order), speaks on behalf of the Ursuline Sisters, drawing on a paper she presented at a session of the 1999 meeting of the Society of American Archivists entitled “Evaluating and Maintaining Mission: A French Colonial Library and Archive Changes Hands.” —The Editors

Kienzler/OSU: The history of the city of New Orleans and that of the Ursuline Sisters have been intimately bound since 1727, when twelve Ursuline Sisters arrived in New Orleans from Rouen, France. The Sisters had signed a contract with the Company of the Indies to educate the girls of the colony, as well as to care for the military hospital. Nine years after Governor Bienville founded the city, the Sisters opened a school and alternately cared for the orphans, instructed Native American and Negro students in religion, and nursed. Enrollment records were not maintained between 1727 and 1806, but since 1806 over 9,000 women have graduated from the Ursuline Academy and College. In 2002 the academy celebrated its 275th commencement, making it the oldest continuously operating girls' school in the United States.

The Sisters, competent and independent women, developed their own system of education and, like many religious communities of educators, maintained a "family business" model within the convent and the academy until the late 1970s. Both the community and the academy responded to crisis and need rather than from a plan. Funds for the school and community were often co-mingled, and large numbers of religious served as administrators and teachers.

Patout/THNOC: The impact of the Ursuline Sisters on Afro-New Orleanians and on the Catholic Church and community has been significant and manifested in many ways. Their library of books relating to almost every branch of knowledge provides evidence of the commitment of the early New Orleans Ursuline teachers to the importance of a well-rounded education. This collection also offered The Historic New Orleans Collection historical depth and a unique opportunity to enhance its already extensive holdings on early New Orleans and Louisiana education. The library collection, with published works detailing the specific methods of Ursuline education, also represented an important sample of the historic record of tradition and progress for this international and long-standing religious order.

Kienzler/OSU: In the 1970s a dramatic shift took place in many religious communities. Fewer women joined their number and Vatican Council II called for increased collaboration among the laity for the works of the church. Noticeable shifts

also occurred within the New Orleans Ursuline community, propelled by both necessity and design. With a reduced number of Sisters available to serve as administrators and teachers in the academy, the community began to share authority with school boards formed to develop policy. Funds for the school and the community were separated. Decision-making became decentralized, and long-range planning became a crucial and integral component of administering the Ursuline Academy.

Awareness of the need for long-range planning affected many other areas of the community's life as well. In the early 1990s, for example, the Ursulines spent six years developing and implementing a plan for the living space of the community. However, administration of the cultural heritage of the community, which included a historical library, a museum, and an archives, was one area where planning was conspicuous by its absence. By the 1990s administration of these historic resources, which still ran on the "family business" model, had become too much for one person to handle.

Ownership and collection continued to be tremendously important, but conservation, preservation, and providing access to the collections proved to be more elusive. Because of the climate in New Orleans, our inability to attend to temperature and humidity control had serious implications for the fragile collection. In addition, technology needed to be used in the cataloguing and administration of these collections.

Gradually the challenges of caring for our cultural heritage became apparent. In 1997-1998 there were nineteen members of the Ursuline community. Approximately two-thirds of the group were retired or semi-retired. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the Sisters did not have—nor would they have in the future—the personnel or funds to properly care for their historical collections.

Charles Nolan, New Orleans archdiocesan archivist, was the first person to become aware of the gravity of the situation with the Ursuline Sisters' historical collections. In his own unique way, Dr. Nolan sowed the seeds of how we should provide proper stewardship of this valuable resource. He worked over a period of several years to increase our awareness of the priceless quality of our holdings, as well as our concomitant responsibility to ensure their preservation. As we began to imple-

ment his recommendations, he encouraged us as if these good ideas had been our own.

Our first task in moving from awareness to action was to prepare an inventory of our resources, a tedious task done by hand by the community archivist over quite a long period of time. It then became obvious that we needed to begin long-range planning for each component of our cultural heritage collection, with priority being given to the historical library. The community established a planning team that included the community archivist, the local council, a group of four sisters of the community who served as my advisors, and myself. Nolan agreed to serve as facilitator, and we are grateful for the assistance rendered by our faithful friend, consultant, and go-between throughout the process.

The community became convinced that the library needed to be preserved, as well as made accessible to scholars. Throughout the years, the Sisters had generously shared their financial and personnel resources within the New Orleans civic community. There was one major resource—the historical library—that they had not yet offered to the city. Nolan agreed to contact THNOC to see if there was any interest in these holdings.

Patout/THNOC: Perhaps one of the most significant factors that kept the process moving along and gaining momentum was the importance of communication between the parties. Certainly Charles Nolan's pivotal role in working with, as well as understanding the needs of, both parties was significant. What was learned from this councilor role and how it aided in the discussions and negotiations were invaluable to this process.

For THNOC, acquisition of the Ursuline library seemed to be an ideal match for its mission to present and interpret the history and culture of New Orleans and the Louisiana region for the benefit of the public. However, estimating the long-term costs associated with technical processing, storage, and preservation proved to be of equal importance in deciding whether to assume responsibility for this collection.

Determining the aesthetic and intrinsic value of the library, as well as how well this material actually fit into the larger context of the other collections of THNOC, took time and analysis but became an integral part of the decision-making process.

Another factor THNOC considered was the amount of physical vault space that would be needed to house this material, since the space required for this acquisition would have an impact on the long-term storage of all materials.

One of the most important administrative factors related to this acquisition was our appreciation for, and productive association with, the Ursuline community. In order to maintain this relationship and simultaneously transfer a large part of its cultural legacy to THNOC, we needed to insure that the Ursuline community was content with the terms of the acquisition and comfortable throughout the entire process.

To respond to that need, THNOC hosted a very personal behind-the-scenes tour for all of the Ursuline Sisters. This memorable day gave all the Sisters an opportunity to observe and inspect the Williams Research Center facilities, hear the staff talk about our collections, and ask important questions about our book preservation, cataloging procedures, and security measures.

Kienzler/OSU: The most significant element of the planning process occurred when all members of the planning committee toured the Williams Research Center of THNOC. Before the tour ended, each of the Sisters had mentioned to me that our books needed to be there. The community had been good stewards of these cultural resources in the past. We were equally convinced that we were exercising good stewardship in the present by choosing THNOC to serve as guardian of the collection for the future.

Patout/THNOC: In accepting the cultural legacy of the local Ursuline community, THNOC felt a special obligation to the community. Once we took possession of the library, our curators immediately set about the task of preserving this treasure trove of books and other materials. The results of exposure to termites and other paper-destroying pests over the course of many years were readily apparent. Therefore, THNOC staff took the entire collection to an off-site location for fumigation before moving any of the volumes to our research facility in the French Quarter.

THNOC had also become committed to getting these books cataloged and into OCLC in a reasonable amount of time. This was a significant undertaking in light of the cataloging backlog that already existed. Initially the library's technical processing unit met the introduction of this noteworthy collection of more than 2,000 titles with great anticipation and praise. Soon, however, the realities of the task of getting these materials cataloged and assimilated into the institution's holdings became a subject of intense discussion and much thought. After evaluating all of the available options for carrying out this responsibility, THNOC decided to contract with the OCLC TechPro Service to complete the Ursuline cataloging. Catalog records for these titles are now available through OCLC's WorldCat database.

These records clearly demonstrate the importance assigned by these teaching pioneers to their library collection. The Ursuline Sisters acquired materials that were quite controversial and worldly for the times, and many of their books touted positive and strong female role models. These books are additional testimony to the carefully-thought-out course of action that produced a tremendous historical record.

With the library acquisition now complete and the book materials cataloged and available to researchers, the next phase of the partnership between the institutions remains a collaborative effort, one that enjoys excellent cooperation and mutual progress. THNOC has microfilmed the Ursuline archives and continues to work with the community's archivist, Sr. Joan Marie Aycock, to provide an index, as well as overall improved access, to this body of records. The Collection regularly consults with the Ursuline Sisters on their museum questions and concerns and responds whenever needs arise in this area.

To really highlight and literally showcase the collaborative spirit of this acquisition, THNOC hosted a major 275th anniversary Ursuline exhibition in 2002. "A Visible Presence, A Legacy of Service: 275 Years of the Ursulines in New Orleans" combined items from the Ursuline archives and museum with a selection of the volumes now held by THNOC. This noteworthy exhibition is not only testimony to the significance of the library acquisition but also underscores the presence of the Ursulines in New Orleans over the past 275 years and their remarkable public contribution as educators of young women.

Kienzler/OSU: How does this story fit into the mission of the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans at the beginning of the twenty-first century? The foundress of the Ursuline Sisters, St. Angela Merici, exhorted her followers, "If according to times and circumstances, the need arises to make new rules or do something differently, then do it, prudently and with good advice." Entering into a contract with THNOC was one very practical way we chose to follow our foundress' lead. A relationship has been forged that we hope will last for many years to come. It has been a rare and unique privilege to be part of a process where everyone wins.

Susan Kienzler served as the leader of the Ursuline Sisters in New Orleans during the time of the transfer of the historic library to the Historic New Orleans Collection. Currently she serves the community as the director of vocation ministry and as a member of the provincial leadership team. She resides in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and is very active with the Catholic Campus Ministry at Southeast Missouri State University. She has a bachelor of arts degree in chemistry from the University of Missouri, St. Louis, and a masters of education degree from the University of Dayton.

Gerald F. Patout, Jr. is the head librarian at the Williams Research Center of The Historic New Orleans Collection. A native of Louisiana, he has served as the president of the Louisiana and Southern Mississippi Chapter of Special Libraries Association, a member of an advisory board for the State Library of Louisiana, and a member of the board of directors of the New Orleans-based preservation organization Save Our Cemeteries.

